J.S. Borthwick

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sexually harassed and economically abused. In *Steel Guitar*, Dee Willis cites her problems in music as due to being a woman. Barnes's women are occasionally arrogant and stubborn, but they are usually strong.

Readers of the hard-boiled tradition will find Barnes's best work in *A Trouble with Fools* and *Coyote*. Readers who like the Carlotta Carlyle series will also enjoy the works of Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky.

**MYSTERY FICTION**

**Michael Sprague Series**


**Carlotta Carlyle Series**


**CRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY**


DONNA WALLER HARPER

**J. S. BORTHWICK (1923–)**

J. S. Borthwick is the pseudonym of Jean Scott Creighton. Born in Buffalo, New York, on September 26, 1923, Creighton attended boarding school at Miss Porter’s School in Farmington, Connecticut. After briefly pursuing her interest in theater, she attended the University of Buffalo (now the State University of New York at Buffalo), where she enrolled in a premedical
program. Her studies were interrupted by World War II, during which she undertook nursing duties at an army hospital. Marriage and the births of her three children followed the completion of her B.A., but she eventually returned to SUNY-Buffalo for graduate study in English. After years of summering in Maine, she has lived there full time since 1976. She volunteers in local public schools, offering writing workshops and lecturing, in addition to her writing.

The five novels in Borthwick's Sarah Deane series (a sixth is forthcoming) present a heroine who solves mysteries almost despite herself. In the first two novels, Sarah is a teacher and graduate student of English literature in Boston, whose summer vacations—birding in Texas in *The Case of the Hook-Billed Kites* and working at a museum and then an art gallery in coastal Maine in *The Down East Murders*—are interrupted by the appearance of a number of corpses. By the time of *The Student Body*, Sarah is a teaching fellow at "Bowmouth College" in Maine, continuing her graduate studies while teaching, and still finding her routines interrupted by sudden deaths.

In the first novel, Sarah begins, haltingly, a romantic relationship with a physician, Dr. Alex McKenzie. Their romance grows over the course of *The Down East Murders*, and in *The Student Body*, she and Alex are living together at the Camden Hills of Maine while Sarah teaches at Bowmouth and Alex is on the staff at Mary Starbox Memorial Hospital. Borthwick's inclusion of Dr. McKenzie as a regular character in the series enables her to introduce a range of medical information into the narrative, and Alex's appointment as a county medical examiner helps cement the forensic aspects of the plots. When the setting changes from Texas to Maine, in the middle three novels, Borthwick also introduces two more regular characters, Detective Sergeant George Fitts of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Maine State Police and Mike Laaka, a deputy sheriff. These two characters have almost diametrically opposed natures. Fitts not only appears, literally, to be an egghead but is, in fact the typical intellectual, unemotional, and detached investigator; Laaka, by contrast, embodies small-town geniality and gossip; he is knowledgeable about the ways of the local people, although more often he is focused on his next bet on a horse rather than on a murder investigation. By using this group of characters over the course of several novels, Borthwick offers the stable, cozy atmosphere associated with traditional village or rural mysteries, with their closed circle of suspects, while she keeps the freedom to change the local venue with each novel. In this tradition, Borthwick is careful to restrict the cast of characters in each of her novels. In the first novel, she focuses on visitors to a Texas wildlife sanctuary; in the second, she focuses on a small island off the coast of Maine and on those inhabitants of the adjacent coastal town with personal connections to the island. Bowmouth College faculty and students provide the cast for *The Student Body*; passengers and crew
of a luxury schooner cruising the coast of Maine are suspects in *Bodies of Water*; and vacationers at the pretentious Rancho del Gato Blanco resort in Arizona come under suspicion in *Dude on Arrival*.

In seeking motives for murder, Borthwick tends to the traditional as well. Whereas the hard-boiled detective novel presumes that corruption is endemic in society—that society itself is the real culprit—Borthwick returns to the more personal motives of Golden Age mysteries, and most often to a greed that leads the villains to live false lives in order to protect their reputations and standing in the community while covertly indulging their extravagant tastes. On a more contemporary note, Borthwick's obvious interests in the outdoors appear in her novels in descriptions of sailing, skiing, and bird watching. Alex McKenzie consistently demonstrates his outdoor skills, while Sarah Deane struggles, usually comically, to stay afloat or on her skis. This enthusiasm for the outdoors translates into a more general concern for the environment. Borthwick creates casts of characters who naturally articulate a range of views on environmental questions, and her love of the outdoors and respect for nature permeate her novels without heavy-handed editorializing.

Sarah Deane is a far "softer" investigator than the hard-boiled women created recently by authors like Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. As an unwilling amateur, she is far more eager to shake off her reputation as a sleuth than to pursue such a line of work professionally. She is also more interested in creating a traditional home for herself than a character like Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski. While she clearly has a mind of her own, controlling, for example, the development of her relationship with Alex, she comes to be fully committed to a partnership with him; she is an equal partner, but she clearly wants—and needs—a man in her life in ways that would seem alien to Warshawski.

Although it is not necessary to read the series in order, the novels seems richer when one can watch the characters growing more complex from book to book. Those who enjoy Borthwick's novels might also appreciate the novels of Jane Langton and, of course, the classic works of Dorothy L. Sayers.

**MYSTERY FICTION**

**Sarah Deane Series**


The Bridled Groom. New York: St. Martin’s, forthcoming.

CRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


ELISABETH BOWERS (1949– )

Elisabeth Bowers was born October 10, 1949, in Vancouver, British Columbia; she currently lives with her partner and her daughter on the Gulf Islands off the West Coast of British Columbia. Bowers studied at the University of British Columbia. In addition to writing, she has made a living as a bakery worker, reporter, tree planter, teacher, library technician, and postal worker.

Both Bowers’s novels, Ladies’ Night and No Forwarding Address, are set in Vancouver, B.C., and feature Meg Lacey, a full-time detective and divorced mother, which is an unusual combination that even Meg suggests some readers may find “indigestible.” Through first-person narration, the reader learns much about Meg’s children as Meg ponders their lives and her part in them. Meg also has a lover, Tom; in Ladies’ Night, the problems in a nontraditional relationship, especially one in which the female partner is a detective, play an important role. In the second book, less action and narration are spent on this relationship.

The feminist point of view taken by Meg Lacey grows out of the path she has followed in becoming a detective. In both books Meg tells the reader how being raped forced her out of the traditional role of a suburban housewife with a husband and two children. Meg’s feminist view is also seen through the role of lesbians; lesbian relationships appear in both cases, and these relationships are accepted by Meg without comment.

The search motif is prominent in both Meg Lacey books. In her first case, she is searching for missing children. Further investigation reveals a child pornography operation that ultimately puts Meg in the middle of a murder investigation and on opposite sides from the police. In the tradition of the adversarial relationship between the hard-boiled detective and the police, the police suspect Meg of withholding information. The intense police interrogation she undergoes, especially at the hands of Inspector Dikeakos (who appears in both novels), enhances the mutual distrust between the police and Lacey.